

A Wigan Soldier's Story of Survival

By Jim Meehan

This is the story of Donald Jolley, an ordinary lad from Wigan who got caught up in WW2 and went on a series of incredible journeys that would shape him and his view of the world. Like many of his generation the war would pluck him away from the life he knew. He would travel to places he could not have dreamt of and endure hardships that would severely test his ability to survive. It is said that in times of war ordinary people do extraordinary things. That certainly applied to Donald.

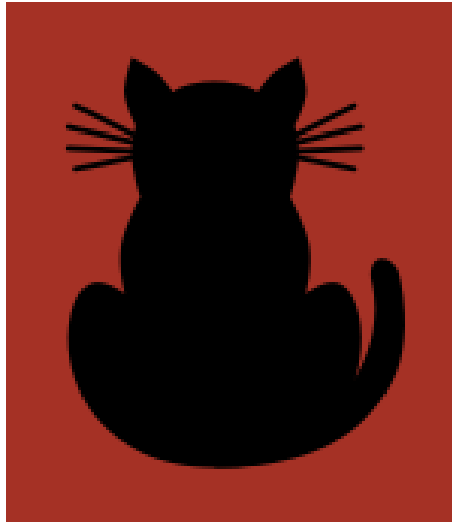
Like most who experience war he was reluctant to talk about his experiences, preferring to keep his worst memories deep inside. By researching service records, war diaries, and archives, and using the recollections of his sons, we can piece things together and tell Donald's story.

When WW2 broke out Donald was busy following in his father's footsteps learning his trade as a bricklayer. He lived with his family in a cosy terraced house on Stirling Street. He was just 18 when he went for his medical at the Ministry of Labour and National Service next to the old Ritz Cinema on Station Road Wigan. A couple of months later, in January 1942, he was on his way to Aldershot to join the Hertfordshire Regiment.



Donald as a new recruit

He spent a couple of months defending beaches in South East England before being transferred to The Royal Fusiliers. This historic regiment was formed to defend King James II. Their ceremonial base was the Tower of London. Along with other London based regiments they formed an infantry division known as the "Black Cats". Donald came to value their iconic insignia and believed it was respected and feared by the enemy.



*Insignia of the 56th Infantry Division,
The Black Cats*

When Donald was given “embarkation leave” it was a sure sign he was about to head overseas. He returned to Wigan to spend a precious two weeks with his family. As he looked out of the departing train window he must have wondered if he would ever see them again. There was just time for a morale boosting visit from George VI before the regiment travelled overnight to the Firth of Clyde, where a convoy was assembled away from the prying eyes of Fifth Columnists.

He was on his way to join the Persia and Iraq Force. The Mediterranean was controlled by the Axis forces, so it meant a two-month trip around Africa, to India, and then across to Basra in Iraq. The young lad from Wigan had to quickly find his sea legs. He discovered places like Sierra Leone, Cape Town, Mombasa, and Bombay. Any excitement was overshadowed by the constant threat of U-boat attack. The stopping points were safe ports where they received a warm welcome. Donald later confessed to his sons that he enjoyed the hospitality a bit too much in Cape Town and ended up spending a night in the cells.

The regiment’s role was to secure the Persian and Iraqi oil fields, as well as a land route from the Gulf to Russia. They spent time learning mountain warfare in northern Iraq. This was preparation for what would come later. Donald was about to start another epic journey. It was now March 1943 and he was on his way to join Montgomery’s 8th Army in North Africa.

They headed south through Bagdad, then east through Palestine. They crossed the Sinai Desert battling through sandstorms. They passed through Tobruk and Benghazi on the Libyan coast. They reached Tunisia at the end of April having travelled 3,223 miles in 32 days. It was an exhausting logistical achievement, moving equipment, supplies, and armaments across hostile terrain.

The Allies had already pinned Italian and German forces back to the area around Tunis. Operation Vulcan and Operation Strike were to be the last push to take Tunis and the surrounding area. This would give the Allies victory in North Africa.

Donald's battalion reached Enfidaville on 29 April 1943. This was to be the site of the last battle of the Tunisia Campaign. Although the Axis forces faced defeat, they deployed elite troops from the German Paratroop regiment and Italian Young Fascist Battalion to make a final stand. Donald's battalion were ordered to occupy a ridge above Enfidaville. There was little cover and each man had to dig hard to shelter from enemy fire. They were continually shelled and mortared suffering 42 casualties.

Further North allied forces liberated Tunis but fighting continued at Enfidaville. On 9 May Donald's battalion were ordered to advance and take enemy positions on hills overlooking Enfidaville. A smoke screen was created, and they advanced between tanks and Bren carriers. As the smoke screen cleared, they came under attack from shelling, mortars, and machine gun fire. The Commanding Officer was hit. He managed to crawl to a tank and was hauled inside.

They withdrew but continued to be mortared. They were shelled by their own guns who were giving defensive cover to a nearby unit. They suffered over 400 casualties. A few days later the Italian and German forces in North Africa surrendered unconditionally. Donald's battalion were able to recover and bury their dead. The final push came at a high cost. Enfidaville War cemetery is the final resting place of 1,551 Allied soldiers. This was Donald's first major battle experience and must have made a lasting impression on him and his surviving comrades.



Enfidaville War Cemetery. The final resting place of Donald's Comrades

The battalion then moved to a camp outside Tripoli, but there was little time to rest. Donald's next journey would form part of Operation Avalanche, the invasion of Italy. Their objective was to land at Salerno, a long sandy bay next to the Amalfi coast. On the voyage across morale was boosted by the news that Italy had surrendered. They were warned though that they would "have to fight just as hard". This would prove prophetic. As the landing craft was lowered Donald and his comrades must have feared for their lives.

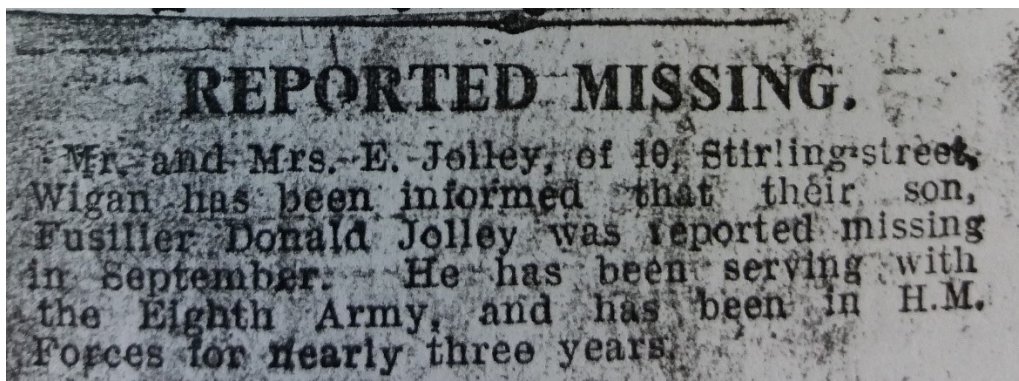
They landed under cover of darkness and successfully established bridgehead "Oliver". They were ordered to take the nearby town on Battipaglia and achieved this with little opposition. Things would change dramatically. German forces launched a devastating counterattack. The town was quickly surrounded by tanks of the 16 Panzers. Donald's Battalion were ordered to hold the town at all cost.

They barricaded themselves into houses but were attacked from all sides. The tanks flattened the buildings they occupied. They retreated but many were cut off. Donald's company were then ordered to hold a bridge with the Grenadier Guards. In one day, the battalion had suffered 14 killed, 39 wounded, 96 missing, and 1 missing believed killed. This was half of the battalion. The British and American forces were nearly driven back into the sea by German tanks equipped with flame-throwers. With the help of shelling from Navy ships offshore, the Allies eventually turned things around, and the German forces retreated.



Men of Donald's battalion in Salerno Sep 1943

Donald's battalion pushed on to take Naples and move up the spine of Italy using their mountain warfare training in places like Monte Cassino. As for Donald, he was now missing in action. The news reached his family in Wigan in October 1943. There was an agonising wait of a month before it was confirmed he was alive and a POW. He was in Stalag 8B at Lamsdorf in Silesia, modern day Poland.



Wigan Observer 16 October 1943 - from Wigan Archives

It was a large camp with 120,000 prisoners. It is the camp where Douglas Bader was held. Donald had to knuckle down and accept life as a POW. The Geneva Convention did not allow POWs to be used as forced labour, but many volunteered. Life on a working party at least got him out of camp. There are many accounts of prisoners establishing a good rapport with their working party guards and the local people they worked with.

Donald was put to work in a coal mine. This held little fear for a lad from Wigan, but the work was hard and there are accounts of prisoners deliberately placing their hands on rail tracks to get transferred away from the mines. Donald's working party was in Konigshutte Bismark. This was on the outskirts of modern-day Katowice which is the large town Donald recalled being taken to for medical tests when he was taken ill. There was a sub-camp of Auschwitz there which housed Jewish prisoners forced to work at the steel plant. Donald always remembered the dreadful acrid smell that emanated from the concentration camp.

The months rolled by punctuated by the occasional Red Cross parcel or letter from home. One particular letter from his father at Christmas 1943 would become precious to Donald. Excitement ran through the camp when they learned British troops reached the bridge at Arnhem in September 1944. The advance eventually failed. It was "a bridge too far". It would be several months, and there would be another journey with more extreme hardship, before liberation finally came.

Donald was about to face the hardest journey of his life. As the Russians advanced from the east the camps were emptied and prisoners forced to march west to remain under German control. It was January 1945 during a freezing Silesian winter when Donald and his comrades were forced to start walking. The conditions were incredibly harsh with little food or water. Armed guards forced them to keep moving. Many did not have the strength and were left by the wayside to die. Some were shot and a number of guards were later prosecuted for war crimes. There are stories of Jewish and political prisoners being marched into the sea. The marching went on for several hundred miles and lasted for three months.



Donald, centre, being liberated near Berlin in 1945

The Long March reached Altengrabow Camp, west of Berlin, when his captors realised Allied forces advancing from the west were nearby. There was a peaceful surrender and the prisoners were at last liberated. What an incredibly joyous moment that must have been for Donald and his comrades after spending so long in captivity. Donald was ready for one more journey. He would head home to Wigan. Victory in Europe was marked by VE Day on 8 May 1945. Six days later Donald set foot on British soil for the first time in three years. But there would be some sad news.

Donald's father Edward did not get the chance to greet his son's return. He had passed away a few months earlier. His letter from Christmas 1943 became even more precious. Donald had carried it close to him throughout the gruelling Long March. It must have helped to keep him going. It was simply about the family and what was happening back in Wigan but for Donald it provided a precious link with home and his father. Miraculously it survived in near perfect condition. Donald's son Anthony continues to keep it safe.



The precious letter from his father Donald carried on the Long March

Donald had been on an incredible journey during his formative years. He travelled thousands of miles. He had been involved in fierce fighting on two continents. He had faced life threatening situations. He had survived but watched many others close to him perish. He had endured the hardship of being held prisoner and survived the Long March. How different the world must have looked as he returned home to Wigan to start the rest of his life?

His service record showed Donald was entitled to three medals. WW2 medals had to be claimed unlike WW1 which were automatically issued. Donald never explained why he hadn't claimed his. Perhaps he just wanted to get on with his life or perhaps he simply didn't get around to it. Nearly 75 years later his son Anthony applied to the MOD to receive them posthumously. After a few weeks a package arrived. Anthony was filled with pride to find five gleaming medals enclosed: The Africa Star (with 8th Army clasp), The War Medal, The

Italy Star, The 1939/45 Star, and The Defence Medal. A precious tribute to an ordinary lad from Wigan.



Donald's medals received by his son Anthony in 2019 over 74 years after the end of WW2